

## Ellen Church and the Advent of the Sky Girls



On May 15, 1930, Ellen Church became the world's first stewardess. Born in 1904 in Cresco, Iowa, Church knew from an early age that she wanted to fly. After graduating from high school, Church earned a degree in nursing from the University of Minnesota in 1926. She moved to San Francisco to work as a registered nurse in the French Hospital. There, she fulfilled her dream by taking flying lessons and earning her private pilot's license.

Hoping to turn her dream of flying into a career, in 1930 Church went into the Boeing Air Transport Office (a forerunner of United Airlines) to ask for a job. She wanted to be a pilot, but the airline only hired male pilots. Steve Simpson, the district manager in the San Francisco office, however, told her the airline planned to hire male stewards like those on some European airlines. Seeing an opportunity, Church convinced Simpson to hire her by touting her nursing skills as a way to ease passenger fears of flying. Boeing headquarters agreed to give Church a three-month trial and told her to hire seven other nurses to work on the planes.

These nurses had to meet rigid qualifications. In addition to being a registered nurse, they could weigh no more than 115 pounds, be no taller than 5 feet, 4 inches, and had to be single. The age limit was 25. They also had to be able to undertake their rigorous job duties: caring for sick and frightened passengers, taking tickets, loading and unloading luggage, helping fuel the plane, passing out lunches, cleaning inside the plane, and tightening the bolts holding the seats to the floor. The "Sky Girls," as the airline called them, earned \$125 per month for 100 hours of flying.



The three-month trial proved a success. The passengers liked the service and other airlines began hiring their own stewardesses or air hostesses. The Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce, created by the Air Commerce Act of 1926) to be the first federal aviation regulator, however, seemed unsure of how to handle this new airline position. In October 1933, the Branch reported that three American airlines, United Airlines, Eastern Air Transport, and American Airways, employed 100 hostesses on their planes.

Saying that it had "no jurisdiction over the airlines hostesses," the Branch described the hostess duties: she "is expected to anticipate the desires of the passengers and meet them, and to avoid

offering unwanted attention.” By November 1935, the number of hostesses had grown to 197. They were employed not only by United, American, and Eastern, but also by Braniff Airways, Columbia Airlines, Harnford Airlines, Transcontinental & Western Air, and Western Air Express. In addition, Delta Airlines employed 2 male stewards and American Airlines had 1 male steward.

In 1939, Robert Hambrook, from the United States Office of Education, undertook an analysis of the airline hostess career. He published his findings in the Civil Aeronautics Authority’s *Air Commerce Bulletin* on August 15, 1939. He surveyed the airlines asking about the employment requirements for hostesses. Although each airline determined its own requirements, he found certain standards fairly common among the airlines. In inquiring about personal qualifications, one airline responded to Hambrook: “The applicant must possess charm, personality, poise, evident intelligence, a general attractive appearance, and clearly indicated refinement; good moral character; the ability to wear clothes well, to speak distinctly, and to use good English.”

In addition to height, weight, marital status, and age standards similar to what Ellen Church had to meet, most airlines required nursing degrees. As one airline replied, “Registered nurses are employed because of their medical training and experience, education, self-discipline . . . the requirement is imposed not for the reason that nursing experience is necessary, but rather because institutionally trained girls are schooled to serve the public.”

The nurse requirement lasted until World War II. At the start of the war, U.S. military need for nurses made it almost impossible for the airlines to hire sufficient numbers of nurses for stewardess positions. Hence, the airlines opened the positions to non-nurses. Media attention and corporate marketing worked to create a stereotyped, glamorous image of these post-war flight attendants, transforming them from professional nurses attending to the safety and comfort of passengers to cultural icons representing high fashion and physical perfection.

To reinforce their position as professionals, not models, on August 22, 1945, five stewardesses established the Air Line Stewardess Association, the first labor union representing flight attendants. The union negotiated its first contract with United Airlines in 1946. The contract raised the monthly salary to \$155, limited duty hours, set rest periods, and established a grievance procedure. In 1949, the union merged with the Air Line Pilots Association affiliate, the Airline Stewards and Stewardesses Association (now the Association of Flight Attendants).

Almost 20 years after Ellen Church made her first flight, the Bureau of Safety Regulation of the Civil Aeronautics Board proposed the first requirement for cabin attendants. On July 29, 1950, the Board issued a notice of proposed rulemaking that said: “One or more competent cabin attendants, commensurate with the number of passengers carried, shall be provided by the air carrier on all flights carrying passengers in aircraft of more than 12,500 pounds maximum certificated take-off weight.” The Board refined the requirement in a second proposed

rulemaking issued on September 1, 1951, which specified that at least one cabin attendant should be on board flights carrying 10 or more passengers or in aircraft of more than 12,500 pounds maximum certificated take-off weight. The rule became final on July 25, 1952.